

**The stories we tell**  
**Bible reading: Acts 7.1-34**

*Then the high priest asked him, 'Are these things so?' And Stephen replied, 'Brothers and fathers, listen to me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham, ... and said to him, 'Leave your country and your relatives and go to the land that I will show you.'*

The stories we tell are the stories we live by. By telling stories, we discover who we are and what we have to do. The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre said, *I can only answer the question, "What am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question, "Of what stories do I find myself a part?"*.

To us, Stephen is the first Christian martyr. We know what's going to happen. But the people in the story don't know that. They can see Stephen's courage, they know his reputation — but he could be wrong. This Jesus that he talks about was executed as a criminal. Like Gamaliel in Acts chapter 5, they have to ask the question, How do we know that following Jesus isn't a dangerous delusion? How does following Jesus fit in with the story by which we live our lives?

Stephen is on trial for his life. He has been accused of blasphemy, of denigrating the Temple and the law of Moses (6.13) — and that's a serious charge. The Council is summoned to hear his defence. We expect him to say, 'That's not what I said' — or 'That's not what I meant'. But instead of answering the charges, he tells a story. It's a very familiar story, a story Stephen and his hearers will have heard from childhood — the story of Abraham, the story of Joseph, the story of Moses and the Exodus. It's the national foundation story, the story that tells why the Temple and the Law are so important. It's the story that underpins the lives of every member of the Council, and will inform the decision they have to make.

But Stephen is telling this story in a different way, a way that points to Jesus. Like everything in the Bible, it starts with God (v.2). God is the one who takes action, gets everything going. God calls Abraham to *leave your country and go to the land that I will show you* (v.3). It's all about leaving present certainties and committing ourselves to an uncertain future — but a future with God in it. It points, ultimately, to the Promised Land, to *this country in which you are now living* (v.4). But in Stephen's story, there's more about the letting go of certainties and learning to trust God than about the ultimate goal. Abraham never owned so much as a foot's length of his promised heritage (v.5). His descendants lived as resident aliens in Egypt for 400 years (v.6).

But this process of learning to trust God is more difficult than it sounds. Stephen reminds his audience that the history of God's people is a history of jealousy and rejection. Joseph became a saviour for his own people, but only after being rejected by his brothers (vv.9-16). Moses tried to help his people, but they turned on him and challenged his authority (vv.23-28). Only when he has been into the wilderness, to experience what it's like being a resident alien for himself, will he be ready to hear God's call and lead God's people into freedom (vv.29-34). Far from dishonouring Moses, this story says, Moses' story — like the whole Bible story — points to Jesus, the rejected saviour whom God sent to save his people.

I wonder what kind of story you are telling yourself about the extraordinary times we're living in? We don't know how this story will end (nobody does!). Sometimes, like Abraham, we might feel that the Promised Land is a long way off. Living in faith doesn't mean knowing how the story will end. But it does mean knowing that whatever the future may hold, it's a future with God in it.

*Living God, you are the author and the ending of all our stories. Help us in this time of uncertainty to place our future into your hands, and to step out confidently into the present with you at our side. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

God bless,  
Loveday